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U.S. War Production Board

Ways of dealing with absenteeism as part of...

Washington, D.C.

[1943]

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GUIDE FOR PLANT LABOR-MANAGEMENT PRODUCTION COMMITTEES

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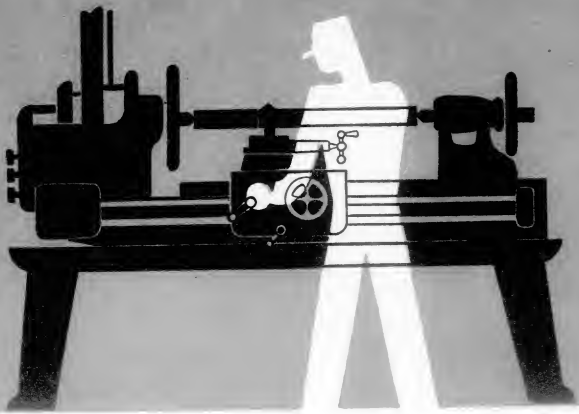

Ways of dealing with ABSENTEEISM *as part of the War Production Drive*

P–14

WAR PRODUCTION DRIVE HEADQUARTERS
WAR PRODUCTION BOARD, WASHINGTON, D. C.

THIS is one of a series of handbooks for the guidance of Labor-Management Committees in their conduct of the War Production Drive.

(*Second printing, June 1943*)

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FOREWORD

"We are all in it, all the way." The President's words, spoken 2 days after Pearl Harbor are coming home to us more seriously every day as those dear to us stand in danger spots in Africa, over Europe, and in the Pacific. And the meaning of the war becomes constantly clearer as more reports come from the countries now under the control of our enemies.

To restore peace and justice there must first be a military victory. That means superiority in the air, and on land, and at sea. Ships, planes, tanks, and guns, the materials for them, and every little part in them must continue to pour forth in the Battle of Production in 1943.

And yet men and women stay home from work. "How can they?" you ask. "Don't they know what this war means? How can they desert the men at the front?"

There is considerable misunderstanding as to absenteeism, because of lack of information on the subject. Some are blaming management, others are putting the whole blame on the workers.

Any high-pressure campaign, based solely on pointing the finger at labor or at management, will fail. On the other hand, any remedial program of action will also fail unless management and the individual war worker have a sense of responsibility toward their job and the whole war program.

Absenteeism cannot and must not be whitewashed. It must be reduced to an absolute minimum in every war plant where it is affecting production. It should be analyzed with thought, and not attacked with emotion.

From experience to date it appears that the most effective way to attack in-plant causes is action through in-plant labor-management committees. These committees enable both management and labor to measure absenteeism in the plant, discover causes, and work out mutually satisfactory steps for their elimination.

(This Handbook was prepared by War Production Drive Headquarters in cooperation with the Labor Production Division, WPB.)

WHAT IS AN ABSENCE?

Who is an absentee? Must it count if a worker is sick or if he has been injured in the factory, or if he has been given time off to look for a house? Should a firm or committee report as absent only those persons who are off for a good time? The War Production Drive Committee may find it hard to compare the absentee figures of its factory, mine, or shipyard with those of a similar place of work. This is because there has been no uniform way of keeping track of absences. Some firms don't count excused absences. Others list as absent persons who have left their jobs but whose names remain on the pay roll until management learns that they have quit.

All absences are likely to interfere with war production. There is some agreement that absenteeism should be defined as any failure to be at work during a period when one is *scheduled* to work. For example, workers are not counted

as absent if they have been laid off or are on authorized vacations.

There are no extensive figures on absenteeism at present. Shipyards and aircraft plants, in cooperation with several Government agencies, are now assembling figures. Beginning in May 1943, the Federal Government will secure uniform and periodic reports which will cover major war manufacturing and mining establishments.

A COMMITTEE IS APPOINTED

To plan a sensible program of action it is necessary to know not only how many people are absent but also *why*

they stay away. The Labor-Management War Production Drive Committee usually appoints a joint subcommittee on Absenteeism in order to get the facts, study the causes, and plan the remedies.

THE COMMITTEE GOES TO WORK

Getting the Facts

The first step is to determine the *rate of absenteeism.* The Committee on Absenteeism may begin by requesting management to compute weekly rates of absenteeism.*

No one is prepared to say what is a normal absentee rate. The important thing to note is whether the figure is going up or down, so that the Committee may know whether its work is effective or possibly whether new causes of absence are appearing.

Some firms try to keep figures by causes of absence but this is difficult to do continuously because of the burden of interviewing absentees. However, it is important to group causes into a sufficient number of reasons so that the Committee may know how to plan its campaign of correction. This can be achieved by interviewing at stated intervals a sample of all absentees. For example, 10 percent of all absentees during the first week of each month could be interviewed in some plants.

If management provides a record of the amount of absence week by week, your Committee can do its part by

*One way to compute weekly rates would be to keep continuous daily records for each shift on the number of workers scheduled to work and on the number of workers scheduled to work who were absent. The weekly rate may then be computed as follows: (1) Add daily figures on *man-days scheduled* for each shift and arrive at a total of *all* shifts scheduled during week; (2) add daily figures on *man-shifts* lost and arrive at a total of *all* shifts lost during week; (3) divide total arrived at in step (2) by total arrived at in step (1). The result will be the percentage rate of absenteeism for that week. It may vary from 1½ percent to 15 percent or more. Because some absences are unavoidable the figure can rarely reach zero in a plant of any size. In some plants it may be desirable to compute more refined absenteeism rates, for example, rates for wage earners and salaried workers, rates by shifts, departments, and by sex.

studying the causes. First of all the Committee will ask for the figures by departments in order to see whether one department is having a higher rate than another. Subcommittees might be organized in each department in order to interview absentees on their return to work. Opinions differ as to whether such department subcommittees should consist of both a management member and a labor member. In some instances the union representative of the department has undertaken the job alone. Certainly this is a task in which the workers themselves can accomplish a great deal. The interview may accomplish two things. It may reveal the real reason why a worker stayed out and it may also have the effect of making that person want to appear on the job regularly if he possibly can.

No elaborate record of the interview is necessary. The interviewer should have a list of possible causes, and space in which to add unforeseen reasons. Then he may make a stroke under the chief cause, with or without recording the person's name. When all the causes are counted for all the departments, the Committee on Absenteeism can determine what are the main problems at the factory, mine, or shipyard. There follows a brief account of possible causes. Some of these will be more serious at one plant than another When the Committee knows, it can plan its action.

Studying the Causes

The reasons for staying away from work are as various as the personal problems that surround any individual at work. Here are some of the causes of absence as reported by committees:

ILLNESS AND ACCIDENT

Sickness and injury are among the largest causes, according to information available at the present time. It is help-

ful to learn the types of illness, since this information can be used in determining preventive measures. Industrial accidents and accidents away from work account for considerable absence. Many firms, however, have reduced their accident figures by a large amount.

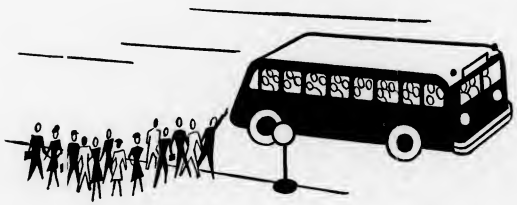
THE KIND OF JOB

Certain jobs have a higher number of "stay outs" than others. Fatigue, monotony, tension due to high-speed machines, heat, as in steel mills and copper mines, these and other physical and nervous discomforts may interfere with steady attendance at work.

HOURS AND SHIFTS

Twelve hours a day, 7 days a week, was the 1942 schedule of some skilled mechanics. A few are still working at this pace and many are working long hours a day, 6 days a week. The shift from 4 p. m. to midnight and the "graveyard" shift interfere with normal family or social life. A young person will stay out to go to a movie or dance with friends. But an "occasional" evening missed by this one and that one mount up to several hundred man-hours a month.

TRANSPORTATION



It has been estimated that over 75 percent of American war workers ride to work in private automobiles. A breakdown or a flat tire can cause tardiness and even absence for four or five persons in a car pool. The uncertainty of trolley and bus schedules often prompts decisions to stay away from work.

HOUSING

Crowded, noisy rooms, unsuitable for workers on night shifts, houses at a distance, temporary quarters of all kinds lead to time off for additional rest and house hunting.

Many families have not found homes at all. The man boards somewhere near his work and then at intervals travels home several hundred miles to visit and is absent from work for a few days.

HOUSEKEEPING RESPONSIBILITIES

When a woman works in a factory or mill she is usually doing two jobs, one at home and one at the plant. Cooking, laundry, mending, care of sick or young children, buying food and clothing crowd in on her so that at intervals she takes a day off to catch up.

Men have some of the same problems. Plumbing breaks down, gas or electric bills have to be corrected, coal, wood,

kerosene must be secured. The bank, post office, draft board, rationing board are visited during working hours.

THE SOLDIER HOME ON FURLOUGH

Husbands and sweethearts come home on furlough. Their time is short and it may be a last visit. Or they may be stationed at a camp not far away. Women workers will be absent both to stay at home with furloughed soldiers or to visit them at camp. Even these absences can be reduced if an employee is urged to consider whether the absence is justified in each case. It may be wise to have a regular plan whereby these absences are limited but permitted under certain circumstances.

POOR PRODUCTION PRACTICES

Low morale often results from not enough work to do one week, too much the next, lack of knowledge of management's efforts to get materials, route work, secure freight clearings, etc. These production problems cause a man to think it is not serious if he doesn't come to work every day.

It is still worse if grievances and bad feeling have been permitted to accumulate between men and foreman or department head. Both men and women will stay away from work if they "get sore" over the way things have been going.

MONDAYS AND SATURDAYS

Figures show that more people stay away from work on Mondays and Saturdays than any other day. The causes have already been indicated. Whether for family duties or for recreation a 2-day pause, Sunday plus Saturday or Monday, looks good to any worker. Much of this absence could be reduced.

DAY AFTER PAY DAY

Everyone has bills to pay. The easiest way to pay them is in cash and before it is gone. Sometimes a week's pay added to savings is just enough to buy something especially desired. So when pay day comes a man or woman takes time off to buy that coat, lay in an extra supply of food, or get that watch that he or she has been wanting for so long. Because goods are scarce it takes longer to find what you want. With many workers staying out on the same day production suffers.

NEW WORKERS IN INDUSTRY

While the armed services are calling millions of men between 18 and 38, industry is recruiting persons who have never worked in industry before. It is absorbing those who are not so young, not so well, not so strong, and many who have not yet acquired steady work habits. Some of them do not feel the pressure to go to work and earn money every

day. Each plant has a larger proportion than ever before of employees who do not yet feel that they "belong" to that particular place of work. They don't come in every day. New and inexperienced workers need adequate training and supervision in acquiring steady work habits.

CHRONIC ABSENTEES

There are certain absentees who annoy workers and employer alike. They are known in every community. Whether it is a "hangover" or just no sense of responsibility, they do not turn up regularly, no matter how much they are needed But in the face of total absentee figures, their number is not as great as the irritation they cause. They are not easy for the Committee to handle, but some of their absences may be reduced when all causes are tackled.

OUR JOB AND THE WAR

Even with friends writing back from the front it is hard for the American worker, far from the crash of bombs, to remember that he is at war. He does not picture his world as it would be if a system of tyranny should encroach on his country. He doesn't know his own importance—what 1 day's worth of the screws he makes can mean when they are put in the parts which need them.

The Committee Plans Remedies

Both management and labor need to take action on measures to combat absenteeism. So it is important that the management representatives and the labor representatives of the Subcommittee on Absenteeism agree as to what are the chief causes at their particular factory, mine, or shipyard. The Committee is more likely to reach conclu-

sions after it receives a report on interviews, but it might agree to do some things immediately as a result of discussion without any study.

The recommendations of the subcommittee must be convincing because much of its program is carried out by management and labor officials on the top War Production Drive Committee and through many of its subcommittees.

The Committee need *not be lenient about absenteeism.* But it need *not blast at everyone* indiscriminately. It can divide the causes of absence into three groups.

1. The unavoidable.
2. The preventable.
3. The inexcusable.

On the latter two groups the Committee *should get results.* We are at war. We are in a war to prove that democracy works, that *people,* reared on democratic principles, *can discipline themselves.* With this in mind, the Committee sets to work.

THE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

As illness may be the chief single cause of absences, a Committee on Health can tackle an important part of the job. Keeping well is not just a matter of eating vitamins. It involves a knowledge of how to take care of one's self and heading off smaller ailments before they start. The Committee can distribute lively, interesting leaflets issued by the United States Public Health Service, Washington, D. C., written in language everyone can understand, with such titles as: "But Flu Is Tougher," "Leonard's Appendix—And How It Burst," "Trouble in the Midriff."

One Committee has a Health for Victory Club which has cooking demonstrations and talks on diet. Similar information could be given on how to prevent the spread of colds, how to deal with digestive troubles, fatigue, recurrent headaches, and on the importance of regular medical examinations. The Committee might even recommend an absence

of 1 day to prevent a later loss of 3 or 4 days. To decide on such action is hard without a well-organized medical department and the alert attention of foremen. If there are no medical services in the plant, the Committee might recommend their establishment as one of the most important ways of preventing illness and combating absences due to ill health.

Some large plants have their own visiting nurses to secure proper home care for sick absentees. In smaller plants the Committee on Health might arrange for a community home-nursing program. The Office of Defense Health and Welfare Services and local Visiting Nurse agencies may be able to help the Committee. Workers absent because of illness will thus be aided to return to work as quickly as possible.

THE SAFETY COMMITTEE

Most labor-management Safety Committees are doubling their effort these days. Workers should be encouraged to report every unsafe situation and should be required to use

the guards which the company is required by law to provide. For thorough study of safety hazards throughout the factory, mill, or mine, the Committee can make use of the free services of technicians made available by the labor-management National Committee for the Conservation of Manpower of the United States Department of Labor. Through the same source it can secure pamphlets which cover fire and electrical hazards, machine guarding, lighting, heating, ventilation, and other topics including safety organization and committees, instructions to new workers, safety equipment and care.

THE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

Labor-management Transportation Committees of the Production Drive, which have already worked out a car-pooling plan, may do some further work. Some committees have assigned to certain individuals the job of keeping an up-to-date record of all active car pools in the plant. In this way a person whose car pool is broken up can be quickly helped to join or form another one. In some cases these individuals are on duty at the plant before the shift at a regular place so that they may be consulted. They may then try to make arrangements during that shift with the members of another car pool.

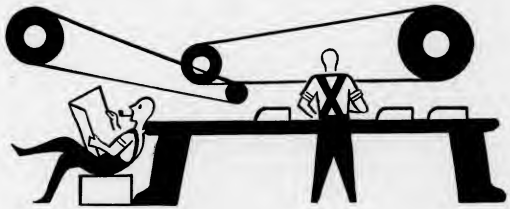
Some Transportation Committees have arranged with those of other war plants to stagger starting and stopping times so that all war workers will not be crowded into trolley cars and public busses at the same hours. Additional service during rush hours can be provided by the transportation companies when shown the results of surveys by labor-management committees.

THE HOUSING COMMITTEE

Adequate housing is a need that cannot be met rapidly enough in the war centers to achieve maximum attendance and efficiency of war workers. The Committee should get the facts on the situation in regard to the employees of its own plant and possibly in conjunction with Committees from nearby companies, and then present the case for housing to the responsible local authority.

As an immediate first step, however, the Committee can conduct an information service on rooms and houses for the aid of new employees, or direct them to the community bureau which offers this help.

THE COMMITTEE ON PRODUCTION PROBLEMS



The subcommittee on Absenteeism must turn for help to the War Production Drive Committee, or its subcommittee on production problems. Such a committee will do what it can to avoid short working time, interruptions to production due to shortage of materials, lack of manufactured parts, poor scheduling, slow conversion, and similar difficulties. The War Production Drive Committee can do much to maintain morale if explanations are made to the workers concerning the reasons for delays and what is being

done to remedy them. A far-seeing management has nothing to fear and everything to gain in this emergency by explaining to employees its policies, its practices, its successes, and its mistakes.

In some plants production bottlenecks are created by the shortage of necessary skilled workers. In others too many men and women are being retained on the pay roll because of possible future needs. These are production problems relating to the utilization of labor which lead to absenteeism. The Committee on Production Problems can help by calling attention to such problems and, where assistance is necessary, the Committee can obtain the services of the War Production Board.

WORKING WITH THE UNION

If there is a recognized collective bargaining agency at the plant, mine, or shipyard, much can be done by the union through its organization—through membership meetings, the union stewards, the union paper—to impress on each member the importance of being on the job every day. Grievances over working conditions can be taken up promptly. If the arrangement of hours and shifts, the number of days worked in succession, has been determined through collective bargaining, the bargaining groups might determine which way the best attendance and highest production are achieved.

Would young people on evening shifts come regularly if a program of recreation was planned at union headquarters or elsewhere at hours to fit their schedule? Could women with home responsibilities be placed in a department with shorter hours or be scheduled so as to have a weekday off occasionally?

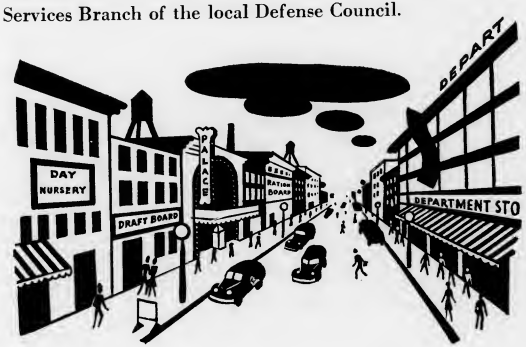
The woman's auxiliaries of some unions will help to get their men to work every day and on time, if they can picture what this means to the war program. The auxiliaries might also work with community agencies in securing needed services for employed workers, especially in organizing groups to care for children after school, or the sick or younger children of women who are now working.

As for habitual absentees, some unions have undertaken to interview them and to apply disciplinary measures for repeated inexcusable absences.

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Many absences are due to community conditions which cannot be corrected in the plant. The Committee may need to take up some of the causes in its own plant with representatives of community and governmental organizations.

In some cases this can best be done through the Civilian War Services Branch of the local Defense Council.



Through these agencies the cooperation of the community can be secured so that food and clothing stores, rationing boards, draft boards, dentists, doctors, and banks can arrange to be open or available at hours convenient to the workers in the plants.

Sometimes some of these services, such as representatives of the rationing boards, might be brought to the plant. On the other hand, motion picture houses, skating rinks, bowling alleys, and other places of entertainment might be asked to function at unusual hours of the day and night for workers on the evening and night shifts.

If absences are caused by the need of home care for the sick, day care for young children, and after-school care for school-age children, plans can be developed in cooperation with the local social and educational agencies. Similarly, the cooperation of public and private agencies dealing with health, sanitation, transportation, training, draft deferment, rationing, and other services can be secured. The causes of absences as found by the plant committees will help to determine which services are needed and thus help direct community planning into the right channels.

MAKING KNOWN THE IMPORTANCE OF WAR PRODUCTION

In inaugurating the War Production Drive, President Roosevelt requested Donald M. Nelson to bring home to management and labor alike the supreme importance of war production. There must be no letup in this effort. Even though everything is done to remove or reduce the recognized causes of absenteeism as shown above, there are still many men and women away from work because they just do not realize the importance of being on the job.

There are three things which every worker should understand:

1. The meaning of this war.
2. The part which the product or material of his company plays in the munitions and equipment of the armed services.
3. The importance of his own job each day in moving the product towards its goal.

The subcommittee on Publicity can plan a continuing campaign to develop understanding. Department meetings conducted by the foreman and union steward, mass meetings run by the War Production Drive Committee, posters and charts can tell the story. War Production Drive Headquarters, through cooperation with other Government departments, will aid in securing aviators, members of the tank corps, seamen who have seen their ships go down, to tell the workers how their product functioned and how great is the need for more. Motion pictures can show the tank, plane, or ship in action and also the material or part that your particular mill, mine, or shipyard is making. A changing supply of motion pictures, radio transcriptions, exhibits, photographs, posters can be secured through War Production Drive Headquarters.

Department meetings may be the best means of explaining to individual workers just what part they are making. Many young women, new to industry, do not know what the little piece of metal is that they are punching holes into or why it is important that it be exactly as specified. Such meetings can be the occasion of inquiry as to why employees are staying out. If there is an atmosphere of trying to find out rather than to scold, plans for remedies can be made.

Charts can be displayed to show workers the great number of absences by departments, by causes, by days of the week. Figures on absences are more telling if they are given in numbers of man-hours lost or in tons of copper, feet of timber, number of screws, airplane engines that have not been produced because of absentees. As the President says: "Lost ground can always be regained—lost time, never."

PERSONAL INTERVIEWS AND HOME VISITS

Some people think they aren't important. They think they won't be missed. They do not stop to think how many man-hours of work are lost when all the absences are added together. Interviews by committee members or union representatives, either at the plant or at home, can first determine the cause of absence. The worker can then be told the importance of his production each day, where it goes, what the holdup means to the day's record and in the final product. His interviewer emphasizes the seriousness of not backing up the men at the front.

Besides the interviews conducted while studying the causes of absenteeism, it will be necessary to make a plan to interview chronic absentees. As said above, in some plants the union takes on this job. In other instances a joint committee sits as a sort of court in those cases. Under any circumstances it is a task which labor can perform more effectively than management. The disapproval of his fellow worker does much to change the habitual absentee to a regular attendant.

AWARDS

While the losses in production due to absences are serious, it must be remembered that the majority of employees work regularly. Any financial awards for perfect attendance should be planned carefully; otherwise they become a regular bonus expected by most employees and lose their effect.

In industries such as mining, where employment has been irregular in the past, an effort is now made to form new habits through the presentation of War Bonds and Stamps every two weeks to selected workers with good attendance records.

GROUP COMPETITION

Competition between departments or shops proves effective in some cases. Workers put pressure on each other so the group can win.

In these group contests, the winning department may receive an appropriate banner to be displayed for the ensuing period. Or they may divide a "jackpot" prize equally among their group. Before launching on interde-

partmental contests a committee would do well to study the character of various departments. One committee re-

ports its contests a failure because most of the older employees with the best attendance records were in the same departments. The competition became a struggle between those who were already doing well and had no effect on the group which presented the greatest problem. Recognition to the department with best progress in reducing absenteeism may be one way of getting results.

☆ ★ ☆

SUMMARY

Each committee, as it knows its groups, will think of additional ways of dealing with the absent worker. This handbook is merely a platform on which to launch the campaign in the plant. Here is briefly what your War Production Drive Committee can do in the plant:

1. Appoint a Subcommittee on Absenteeism.
2. The Subcommittee determines the amount and causes of Absenteeism.
3. It gets help in the plant from other subcommittees of the Production Drive: Health, Safety, Transportation, Housing, Production Problems, Publicity.
4. It works with the community.
5. It arranges personal interviews and home visits.
6. It utilizes awards and competitions between groups.
7. It uses the Anti-Absenteeism Action Kit. (See next page.)

These activities are interlocked with many parts of the War Production Drive program. Remedies for absenteeism will aid in reducing turnover and will at the same time improve the morale and efficiency of the worker who stays on the job. As in total war, all efforts of the community work to one end so one part of the Drive program will help all parts. War production will increase, and that is what we need to win this war.

INFORMATION PROGRAM

To assist Labor-Management Production Committees which undertake Anti-Absenteeism Programs based on this handbook, War Production Drive Headquarters has prepared for distribution a special Anti-Absenteeism Action Kit. Included are printed materials, sample letters to be sent to absentees, a transcription, and other publicity ideas. Drive Headquarters is also starting a special bulletin service to plow-back to Committees good ideas for combating absenteeism.

ANTI-ABSENTEEISM ACTION KIT

Chief idea in the Kit is the concept of the Absentee Bugs—the bugs of illness, accidents, poor transportation, etc., which "bite" the workers, causing *involuntary* absences. Through this device, *voluntary* absences are vigorously attacked, yet workers are not condemned indiscriminately for absences partially or completely beyond their control.

The Kit is designed for a concerted drive during a 2 or 3 weeks period to attract the attention and support of every man and woman in the plant. Here is a pattern to follow in using the 10-Point Anti-Absenteeism Action Kit.

Informational materials alone cannot do the job. They must be backed up by committee action. The Anti-Absenteeism Action Kit can be of service only to those Committees which are actively trying to solve the problem of irregular attendance, for the materials in it are all based on an *action* program.

When the Labor-Management Committee or subcommittee on absenteeism has laid its plans, the Anti-Absenteeism Action Kit can help tell the workers that something can be done and is being done to lick the Absentee Bugs.

1. To start the campaign, a teaser (size 11½″ x 14½″) for bulletin boards. (All Absentee Bug materials are 3-color combinations, blue, yellow, and green.)

2. Replace the teaser with the first placard (size 14½″ x 20″).

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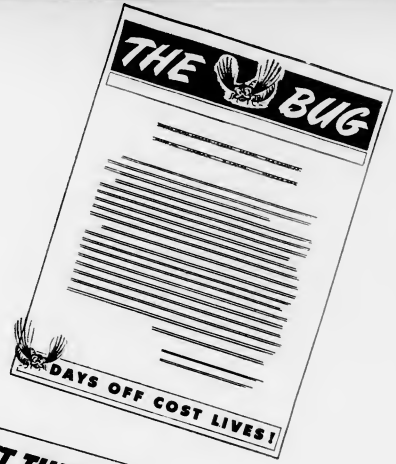
3. Distribute this 4-page leaflet, which tells how the Committee is trying to lick the *involuntary* absentee bugs, and calls upon each worker to lick the *voluntary* absentee bug himself.

4. Replace the first placard with this one, which shows that progress is being made.

7. Use the two posters (28½" x 40"). A GOOD SOLDIER STICKS TO HIS JOB and KEEP PUNCHING EVERY DAY which call for perfect attendance.

8. Localize and use the three sample letters to be sent to chronic absentees.



5. Issue regular progress reports on Bulletin Board Forms available from Drive Headquarters (size 8½" x 14").

6. Final placard goes up.

9. Make use of various publicity ideas for labor and management publications and newspapers; for public address systems and radio. A 15-minute transcription "Uncle Sam and Presenteeism" is available for plant rallies.

10. Use the Idea Bulletins, to be sent regularly from War Production Drive Headquarters.

PLACARD—Item No. 2 in the Absentee Bug program of informational materials. (See inside pages 28–31.)

FOR A SAMPLE ANTI-ABSENTEEISM ACTION KIT

Write

WAR PRODUCTION DRIVE HEADQUARTERS

War Production Board, Washington, D. C.

GPO

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